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Holes in His Hiss Story

Robert Novak's attack on my views of Alger Hiss [op-ed, Nov. 21] reminds me of Noel Coward's description of one of his lesser characters: "He always speaks his mind and thereby considerably limits the scope of the conversation."

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Thus the Novak column quoted me with peculiar selectivity and out of context to limit the scope of what I said about Hiss. My opinions can be checked in the Nov. 16 Baltimore Sun, where Novak obtained the quotations he misused.

To cite one example, Novak criticizes me for saying that "It was the Hiss trial . . . that triggered the McCarthy era." This use of an ellipsis reminds me of how some people distorted documents in the early 1950s. My actual, quoted words were that "It was the Hiss trial, among other [events] that triggered the McCarthy era." I know of no one who has seriously researched the era who disagrees with the latter statement—or who agrees with the former.

Novak introduces me by saying I am a "liberal"—a term now used as condemnation by those particularly ignorant of American history. He is, I might add, also apparently ignorant of my published views on 20th-century U.S. foreign policy if he characterizes those views as "liberal."

His column proves the point I made that he disliked: The argument over Hiss's guilt will go on as long as the argument over the Cold War's origins, unless new, better evidence (especially from Soviet archives) ends the debate.

—*Walter LaFeber*